

September 24, 2017

Does God Like Me?

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 8:26-39

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I'm sure many of you have heard at one time or another, portions of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous "love" poem, written to her husband, from her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Let me share parts of it with you. And, oh, incidentally, if you're sitting with your spouse right now, grab their hand... go on now... grab their hand... and mentally say these words to each other. And, if your loved one is no longer on this side of heaven, think of saying these words when you meet again.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, (and to the) ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of every day's

Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.

I love thee freely, I love thee purely,

I love thee with a passion. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life! -- and, if God choose(s),

I shall but love thee better after death.

Wow! When we hear this poem we can't help but be awed by the wholeness and completeness with which she expresses her love for another person. And you know what - it's been said that truly beautiful poetry and art and music is inspired by God working within us. And this poem is written as if Elizabeth Browning could be echoing how God proclaims his all-consuming, never ending love for you and me. Like when he says, "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken." "I have engraved you on the palms of my hand." "Abide in my love." "You are precious and honored in my sight and I love you." Yes, indeed, that's how fully and all-encompassing God loves us.

But, today I thought I might pose to you a corollary question. God does love you, that's for sure, but do you think God likes you? Does God like you? That's a whole different question, isn't it? I remember a time as a teenager, just before heading off to college, working with my Mom in the kitchen, getting ready for dinner. And I asked her, "Mom, do you like me?" I could tell she was shocked by my

question, because she immediately responded, “Honey, I love you.” But I shook my head and said, “I know that. But I want to know is, do you like me?” You see, I already knew she loved me. She took care of me, she taught me things, she provided me with all kinds of opportunities and experiences. She did all the wonderful “mom” things anyone could hope for, so I didn’t doubt her love. But I wanted to know if she liked me. Did she find my conversation meaningful? Did she feel like she was getting something back out of our relationship? Did she think of me, not only as a daughter, but now, as a friend? Do you see the difference? So when it comes to the question, does God like me - does God like me, some of us might have trouble with that. Why? Because so often we don't much like ourselves. It could be for any number of reasons, but because nobody knows me better than I know me, and I don't think I'm such hot stuff, it's a reasonable assumption that maybe God doesn't think so, either.

Psychologists say that many of the experiences that form our beliefs about ourselves often, although not always, occur early in life or as young adults. What you saw and heard and experienced in childhood, what happened in your family, or in the wider community, at school, college or on the job. All have influenced the way you see yourself – sometimes good and sometimes bad. Examples of some early experiences that could lead to you thinking badly of yourself include:

- systematic punishment, neglect or abuse
- failing to meet parental standards
- failing to meet peer-group standards
- being on the receiving end of other people's stress or distress.
- belonging to a family or social group that other people are prejudiced against.
- an absence of praise, or warmth, or affection, or interest.¹

And experiences like these, even though they are not our fault, can cause negative thoughts to enter in and even control our thinking and our actions. As a result, it then becomes easy to get down about things, become unhappy or insecure, and unable to cope with all those demons inside. In fact, in today's Scripture lesson we encounter just such a person. So let's look at it.

Now, hear this story once, and you'll likely never forget it. It's about a man who is obviously struggling with various issues and problems and probably feels that God neither loves him nor likes him, and, consequently, his life is full of demons, full of despair and pain. It happens in a land called Gerasenes,

¹ Overcoming Mental Health Network

where, St. Luke tells us is on the opposite shore from Galilee. Now Galilee is where Jesus called his disciples, those who left their nets and livelihoods and followed him so that they could learn from him, and become like him. This, however, is opposite side. That should tell you something. Nowhere else in the entire Bible do we find a mention of Gerasenes, other than in this story. And you can't find it on the map. Perhaps it was some sort of nickname for a real town. Like, "P" town for Provincetown, or "Deluxe" bury for Duxbury. You can't find those names on a map either. Anyway, it was called Gerasenes. When I visited Israel, our bus tour took us on that side of the Sea of Galilee. It's a land that used to be Syrian and Jordanian territory. And there are still signs warning you to be cautious of the land mines left from the various wars in that area. Yes, somehow, you just felt unsettled there.

And we read in the scripture, "When Jesus stepped onto the land, he was met by a man who was homeless and naked, living in the tombs outside the town." How's that for a welcome! This man was obviously tormented, and he was living, not in a house, but among the dead. Yes, those demons I was referring to can kill you. And because this man is fighting so vehemently within himself, he has become violent. So they put him in chains to hold and bind him. Yet, his demons are stronger than his chains. They're like an entire Roman army, they're so strong. In fact, when Jesus asks the man, "What is your name," he replies, "Legion," because of the army of demons living inside him. And what happens? Well, interestingly, at the very sight of Jesus, to be in his presence, to know the power Jesus has over them, those demons become afraid. And, then, Jesus cast those demons out of the man, and appropriately, into a herd of pigs, which then run over the cliff into the sea to be washed away. Don't you just love the symbolism? Washed away.

And you see, this is a lesson as to exactly what Christ can do with our demons as well. Over the years, I've talked to enough people to realize that all of us have a demon or two or more that is keeping us in chains, living in tombs of frustration, hopelessness, anxiety, fear. And yet, here is this story, so important, that it's repeated in three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, whose message gives us hope and assurance. And that message is that the demons of sorrow or shame or regret or bitterness do not have to get the best of you. The demons of anger, revenge, worry, depression do not have to control your attitudes or actions. Instead, Jesus can cast them out. And he can replace those demons with his spirit of peace. Peace - giving you a new start. Just like he did with this man, Jesus can do it for you too! Because, you see, Jesus likes us, even when we don't like ourselves. How do we know this? Because on the night before he died, he told his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, that he lay

down his life for his friends. And I have called you my friends.” And because he laid down his life for you and me, Jesus calls us his friends as well. And we like our friends, don't we! Someone once defined friendship as “knowing the heart of another and wanting to please one another.” This is the kind of relationship we can have, should have, with our friend, Jesus Christ.

Going back to the story, the scripture tells us that after Jesus released the man of his demons, the man ended up fully clothed, sitting at Jesus' feet. And I can just imagine the two of them talking. The man, amazed, saying “Thank you, Jesus. Thank you. No one has ever done anything like this for me before. No one wanted to be my friend because I was so messed up. But you – you must actually like me!” And I can imagine Jesus saying to the man and to us, “How do I love thee...check that, how do I like thee? Let me count the ways

1. Come to me when you're burdened, and I will give you rest.
2. Your sins are forgiven.
3. My peace I give you... you don't have to be afraid
4. Do not worry about your life. Your heavenly Father knows what you need.
5. When you mourn, I will comfort you.
6. Seek first God's kingdom and you will have all that you need.
7. Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and the door shall be opened.
8. Abide in my word, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.
9. I will prepare a place for you in my Father's house and someday I will take you there.
10. I am with you always – even to the end of the age.

Yes, how do I like thee, let me count the ways. Amen.